



Church Music Help Sheets

“O” Series – for Organists Rhythm and Phrasing on the Organ

O2

This sheet is intended to help organists who have had little or no tuition in organ playing, and who want to modify their piano skills to play an organ (pipe or electronic) for Christian worship.

Rhythm. The organ is not naturally a rhythmical instrument, but you can use it in such a way that you create an illusion of rhythm. Try this:

- Play a scale (8 notes) at an even speed, not too fast and legato. There is no apparent rhythm even if you have been putting more finger pressure on some notes than on others.
- Play it again, starting with a staccato note and then playing in couplets, raising your finger after each couplet. Repeat, using triplets. You have established a rhythm of two beats (or three). The notes are all the same in volume, but the note after the staccato note sounds loudest to the ear.
- Now play the scale all staccato at an even speed but leaving your finger a little longer on the first note of each couplet or triplet. Again you have created an illusion of rhythm.

This technique is particularly useful in organ music of the Baroque era or earlier, i.e. before the expression marks in music were developed and in common use. Where editions of early organ music show phrasing and staccato marks, they are probably editorial and you are free to make up your own mind on what would make the music sound most interesting. Some late 20th and 21st century composers also leave a lot of interpretation to the performer.

Phrasing. When we speak, we speak in groups of words, sometimes whole sentences, sometimes phrases, to make our meaning clear. In music, we do the same thing. Wind players and singers have an additional reason for taking a break from time to time - they need to breathe! Phrasing is an integral part of our way of expressing ourselves in speech and also in music.

The organ is capable of delivering a long, long melody over an indefinite period of time without a break, i.e. for as long as you are prepared to keep your hands on the manuals. But how boring that would be! Although a modern organ has a reliable air supply, its song will be more meaningful and interesting if you let it sound as though it is singing in phrases - breathing.

In hymns, unless you have an accompaniment which is different from the voice parts, shape your phrases to coincide with the phrases in the words. In “Help us, O Lord, to learn” (TiS 428, AHB 340), for example, the words run on from the first line into the second in each verse and from

the third line into the fourth in the first two verses. The music should do the same.

Remember, however, that punctuation is only a formal way of showing on paper the relationships between words. Punctuation marks, especially commas, do not always warrant a break in the flow of the words - or the music.

In the hymn quoted above the first phrase in each verse is "Help us O Lord." To make a break after "us" would be excessive. You also need to make up your mind whether you are going to observe all the commas in lists, as in "God who made the earth, the air, the sky, the sea," (TiS 746, AHB 82) or repeated words as in "Holy, holy, holy" (TiS 132, AHB 65).

Copies of any of these Help Sheets may be obtained from the Secretary of RSCM Australia, ACT Branch:
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